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TAGS: PTER PREL PINS ASEC MASS MOPS SO DJ
SUBJECT: DJIBOUTI/SOMALIA: AL-SHABAAB CHANGING TACTICS, BUT CAN BE
DEFEATED

REF: 09 DJIBOUTI 1031; 05 DJIBOUTI 1094; 05 DJIBOUTI 1071

CLASSIFIED BY: Eric Wong, Charge d'affaires, ad interim, U.S.
Department of State, U.S. Embassy, Djibouti; REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. Abdillahi Mohamed Abdillahi, deputy director of Djibouti's National Security Service, assesses that the struggle against al-Shabaab is "a war we can win," if timely support is given immediately to Somalia's Transitional Federal Government (TFG). While Djibouti is actively training TFG troops, al-Shabaab is shifting its tactics to hit-and-run attacks and suicide bombings, as it expects that African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) forces will be strengthened. As U.S. and coalition forces exert tighter control over Afghanistan, hundreds of foreign fighters are coming to Somalia and Yemen, seeking to destabilize the Horn of Africa region as well as the Arabian Peninsula. Failure to stop al-Shabaab in Mogadishu would thus lead not only to disastrous consequences for Somalia, but also the entire region, if conflict spread to Ethiopia, which is already vulnerable due to existing ethnic and religious tensions. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (S/NF) Principal Director to the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for African Affairs, in the Office of the Undersecretary of Defense (OSD(P)/ISA/African Affairs) Catherine Wiesner; CDA a.i.; Security Cooperation Officer; and GRPO chief had a working luncheon on August 1 with Abdillahi Mohamed Abdillahi, deputy director of Djibouti's National Security Service.

BILATERAL COOPERATION WITH THE U.S.

¶3. (C) Abdillahi hailed strong bilateral cooperation between Djibouti and the United States on security issues. France (the former colonial power in Djibouti) had initially viewed the growing U.S.-Djibouti partnership with some concern -- "like introducing a wife to a second wife," he said -- but now the relationship among all three had matured. Abdillahi acknowledged that Japan had formally informed Djibouti's foreign ministry of its interest in establishing its own military base in Djibouti (near the U.S. and French bases adjacent to Djibouti's international airport). Abdillahi added that the GODJ had cautioned the Belgian expatriate airport director Philippe Lievin (who manages the airport on behalf of Dubai Ports World) to refrain from interfering in base talks with the Japanese, as it was a matter for "national security" officials.

¶4. (SBU) Illustrating the degree to which the GODJ sought to safeguard U.S. interests and personnel, Abdillahi recalled that immediately following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, he had been personally involved in removing tenants from a residential building located directly across the street from the U.S. Embassy chancery compound, citing security concerns. While some tenants had been in government-owned apartments, others had been removed from privately-held residences. Despite a lawsuit by some former tenants, no compensation had even been provided by the USG. (NOTE. In response to tenant demands in 2005 for approximately USD 700,000 in compensation from the USG, Department's guidance was that the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations provides that a host government has a "special duty to protect the premises of the mission" of a foreign state, and that "having an uncontrolled facility in such close and open proximity to the U.S. mission, and directly overlooking the premises of the U.S. mission, is inconsistent with this duty." However, the USG was "not in a position to reply favorably" to any request for compensation. See refs B-C. As recently as May 2009, former tenants sought to return to the vacant building to conduct renovations, but were denied access by GODJ officials, citing continued security concerns. END NOTE.)

¶5. (C) Beginning a tour d'horizon of the security situation in Somalia, the Horn of Africa, and Yemen, Abdillahi assessed that presidential elections in Hargeisa (Somaliland) would likely be postponed further, due to President Riyale's rejection of the results of what had been a year-long voter registration process. As for Puntland, gains from maritime piracy had sparked economic growth in coastal communities that lacked any other business activity. Puntland elders therefore opposed placing restrictions on "fishing" by youth; at the same time, piracy bosses were displacing the influence of traditional elders and clan leaders. Puntland's President Faroole's pledges to international partners to combat piracy were meant only for "public consumption" outside Puntland, as he lacked the requisite political authority, military assets, or economic alternatives to effect any change.

FIGHTING AL-SHABAAB IN SOMALIA: "A WAR WE CAN WIN"

¶6. (C) As for southern Somalia, Abdillahi underscored the urgent need to provide timely support to the TFG. On ongoing efforts by the Djiboutian and French military to train TFG fighters in Djibouti (ref A), Abdillahi stated that the 160 TFG forces being trained by the French would include 10 officers (3 of whom were colonels). These 10 would serve as officers for both the 150 French-trained and approximately 460 Djiboutian-trained TFG troops, once they had all returned to Somalia.

¶7. (C) Abdillahi assessed that al-Shabaab could be defeated, if the TFG could gain control of Mogadishu. "It is a war we can win," he said. Al-Shabaab did not have pervasive control over the entire country, as the Taliban did in Afghanistan; al-Shabaab's killings of fellow Muslims undermined popular support among Somalis. Al-Shabaab was shifting its tactics to hit-and-run attacks and suicide bombings, as it anticipated that AMISOM forces would be strengthened. Alleged sightings of foreign aircraft in southern Somalia had prompted al-Shabaab to fear aerial attack by helicopter; al-Shabaab fighters were therefore removing mounted guns from "technicals" to reduce their target profile.

¶8. (C) As U.S. and coalition forces exercised a tighter grip on Afghanistan, hundreds of foreign fighters sought to base themselves in the ungoverned spaces of Somalia and Yemen, from which they hoped to destabilize neighboring countries in the Horn of Africa as well as the Arabian peninsula, Abdillahi said. If Al-Shabaab succeeded in destabilizing Somalia, then there was a risk of unrest in neighboring Ethiopia. Several factors contributed to Ethiopia's vulnerability as a state: its ethnic stratification; "winner-take-all" system (e.g., in which ethnic Tigrayans from the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front had largely supplanted ethnic

Amharas from the communist Dergue, to dominate all government institutions); and its shift from a majority orthodox Christian population with a Muslim minority, to a majority Muslim population. Ethiopia's dissolution, however, would be a "catastrophe" for the region. Similarly, fissures in Yemen threatened that country's stability.

19. (C) COMMENT. Hosting U.S., French, and Japanese military contingents, as well as the EU's counter-piracy naval task force, Djibouti strongly supports international efforts to promote regional peace and security. Maintaining stability in neighboring Somalia is a key priority for the GODJ, which has provided significant diplomatic and military support to President Sheikh Sharif's TFG, and whose population is majority ethnic Somali. As Abdillahi serves as the deputy to Presidential National Security Advisor Hassan Said Khaireh (who is also director of the National Security Service, and head of President Guelleh's military office), his observations likely reflect the security concerns of senior Djiboutian leadership. END COMMENT.

WONG